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PRESENT-DAY TENDENCIES IN ETHICAL THEORY.

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THE problem as to how far ethical judgments and standards are relative and how far absolute seems unusually acute to many present-day writers on ethics. Not a few feel that the settlement of this problem conditions one's answer to every other ethical question, and even controls one's response to every call for an ethical judgment.

As a matter of fact we live in a world where there are both things relative and things absolute, the flowing and the fixed, the temporal and the timeless. The first type is sufficiently revealed in the ordinary facts of sense and of human actions which are never twice the same. The second type appears in the realms of logic and mathematics, where entities and relations are always the same. Can we definitely make a home for ethical standards in either one of these types? Do we find them in the flux or among the abiding forms of things? Or do they partake of elements which belong to both types of being, and if so, how much of each?

With reference to this point, it has not been sufficiently observed that authors whose sole or principal interest is in ethics or sociology almost uniformly flock to the side of the relativity of ethical standards, while those whose primary taste is for metaphysics are never quite satisfied with relativity. The reason is not far to seek. Moralists tend to isolate the moral data of experience and study them in their own terms—then if they be concerned to enter other realms of enquiry it is inevitable that they should subordinate the latter to ethics or at least attack them with rather definite presuppositions. Hume, keen and frank thinker that he was, frankly confessed this bias. His deepest interest was in morals; finding things quite relative there, he was predisposed to see relativity everywhere. This is natural to all students of morals. Some have little metaphysical

curiosity; those who cannot quench their cravings for a more comprehensive philosophy easily read their metaphysics in the light of their moral investigations.

Such an interest and method, however, pledges them in advance to relativity, for the history of ethics, so far, at least, shows little that is fixed and changeless, little that is apparently akin to the static principles of logic and geometry. However one may desire unity and standardization, the plain facts of human history cannot be blinked—motives have been various, aims and purposes have been contradictory, values have been shifting, ideals have been flexible to the point of total transformation. Those who apply themselves first to such facts as these are apt to be strongly prejudiced by them in all their thinking. It is not to be marvelled at that thinkers like Sumner, Westermarck, Nietzsche, and others, emerge from their studies confirmed relativists. How can they escape relativity if they seek to interpret ethics in its own terms, without an equal and parallel interest in other fields of experience? The ideal scientist would begin his investigations with no preference for one realm of enquiry above another, and but one pre-supposition, namely, that all realms would yield truth. This would save him from partiality, though perhaps he would pay for it by achieving nothing.

However, it is among those who do try to read the whole universe at one sweep that we meet with a conscious effort to transcend ethical relativism. Believing a unified interpretation of all things possible, such men refuse to leave ethics disconnected; they insist on getting some common measuring concept to apply to all experience. Seeing in this concept something structural, something inherently characteristic of all existences, they naturally make of it the conditioning factor of ethical judgments. It becomes for them an absolute determiner of right and wrong. Ethics is brought into harmonious connection with science and logic. How far are they successful in this attempt to find fixed norms which shall apply to ethics in common with other types of subject-matter?

It seems to me that each of the outstanding groups of philosophers has hit upon something that is truly structural in this respect, something that saves moral experience from the shaky hand of the relativist and gives it a certain degree of fixity. But most of them try in vain to pursue the philosophic game of stretching a single concept over all things. Absorbed in the heroic effort to pack the universe into one lone trunk, they forget that it is quite possible to travel with many.

Take the materialists,¹ for example. Adaptation is the word that seems to them the key to the mystery of things. All life seeks adaptation to its environment. It strives to fit into the situation in which it must live, in order that it may continue to live. Ethics, says Spencer, is just the final stage in this whole process. It is life's adaptation to a human social environment. The right act is that act which secures the best adjustment—the act which best ensures continuing existence and prosperity for the social unit. This theory neglects many important facts. But at least it forces certain indubitable facts upon our attention. Ethical activity at any moment is certainly conditioned by its environment. It does not start off *de novo*, but grows out of a past, and the past is around it still in a solidified form. Activity is impossible without a large degree of adaptation to the material situation. Living beings can do nothing without taking adequate account of the material basis of life. Still less can they act, ethically at least, without consideration of the other lives with which they are in social continuity. This continuity with the material basis of things and with the social environment conditions any ethical act or judgment so far forth. In whatever degree this determination operates, to that degree we have a constant element in the ethical situation, a part of its fixed structure that is independent of flux and change.

¹ By "materialism" in this paper I mean the theory that would reduce all terms to physical or chemical units and all relations to formulæ of a mechanistic sort.

Or take the idealists. For them the magic word is the absolute, or the universal. The fitness of a thing to enter the realm of logical harmony is their criterion or standard. The real world is the world of logic, the world of concepts, tied down by their definitions to a trustworthy immovability. Among these concepts are those of ethical values, which are caught up in the logical system and take their place in the abiding hierarchy of reality. Ideas such as justice, reverence, truth, love, represent groups of relations in which ethical beings are connected, all having their analogues wherever there is plurality in connectedness. It is fruitless to enquire after their origin; they are fixed types of continuity, quite independent of time. The idealist is thus concerned to maintain the conditioning of ethical conduct by the ultimate environment of all existence (the ideal), as the materialist its conditioning by the immediate environment of physical and social facts. G. P. Adams is right when he insists that ethical values are thoroughly objective. We do not project them outward from the welter of our own uneasinesses, and call them values because we create them by our wants; they are already there in their beauty and attracting power; we become uneasy because we see them, and seeing them in all their charm we come to want them. This relationship to that which is absolute actuality, that which awakens desire in us by its magnetic beauty, is a constant feature of the ethical life, and being constant, is a part of the fixed structure of things. Ethical values are themselves creative and effective, as Hocking and Bosanquet so forcefully declare; they make a difference; they produce results. They descend upon us in a very real sense, they seize us, they entice us, they draw us away into a pursuit of the good. One hears it said to-day that values exist as a means to further life. But *why* live? Is not life itself a value, the very summation of values? If so, there is no possibility of escaping objectivity sooner or later. Value as such is no mere means, but exists and is effective in its own right.

The idealist, too, finds mathematics in human conduct.

I must do justice to my neighbor, says Rashdall, because he is one and I am one, and one equals one. This argument on its face seems specious, because one of its presuppositions is left out. That is the paradox that in the ethical realm my neighbor is as large a part of my life as I am myself, and is to be dealt with accordingly. I have expanded to become one with the social self, and as such I estimate my own individuality in the same light with which I regard my neighbor's. By a *coup de force* of self-transcendence I have *taken* as great an interest in my friend as in myself—I have raised conduct so far as I am concerned, into the mathematical realm—I have given my judgments Kantian universality. In these different ways idealism in its turn has discovered the abiding amid the flowing. It has glimpsed elements in the relational structure without which ethical acts and judgments are impossible.

Other schools of writers who essay to treat of ethics, the new realists, the vitalists, the individualists, and the pragmatists, hardly do more than present minor variations on one or another of these aspects of the ethical problem. Most of them try to transcend relativity and reduce ethics to something like a science, and they all move pretty definitely in one of three directions. Some treat the good as the fundamental concept, describe it in terms of human wants, and regard right or duty as simply a matter of choosing the means. This leans to the side of a materialistic view of ethical situations, though not confessedly mechanistic. It is the position of most of the new realists. Russell began in this group, but his pessimistic outlook upon the universe gradually transformed his melioristic ethics into a rather passive, mystical fellowship with the indestructible entities of logic and pure mathematics. Others lean to the side of Kantian idealism. Croce is an example of this group. Right, or duty, he insists, is always something universal and objectively valid, while human interests and wants are quite inferior, matters economic rather than ethical. In the third group are our present-day pragmatists, who maintain that both good and duty are

fundamental ethical concepts, neither wholly reducible to the other. An attempt is made to strike a compromise between materialism and idealism on the one hand, and relativism and universality on the other. The former compromise is sought in the consideration that the ethical life is creative, not only adapting itself to the present environment, but continually making, in each of its choices, a new environment with new conditions of adaptation. This means that not only the consequences in terms of happiness determine the rightness or wrongness of an act, but also the character produced by it in the persons ethically related. This character, they would insist, has little connection with the wider effects, but depends primarily on the present motive and purpose. The latter compromise is felt after in the notion of a moving objectivity. The standard is truly objective, says Professor Tufts, but the objectivity is nothing fixed and static. It moves from generation to generation as its content changes. The fixed element is purely formal, it is merely the purposed ordering of all the factors of the situation.

This idea of a moving objectivity reveals the pragmatic interest in the mobile and changing. Of course all concrete existences are in time, and therefore moving. Are they not for that reason unsuited to be a standard, since a standard is used for purposes of measurement and must be something stable? And there is, besides concrete existences, a stable structure of reality which does afford a certain objectivity quite above time—above time because it is a system of continuities of which time is one. It would seem that an ethical standard, if it be possible at all, must be something of this sort—not a moving individual existence but a type of continuity inherent in the structure of things. Why must we fall in love, either with the flux or with the eternal? Why insist, either that existences can be reduced to structure or that structure is a mere implement for the sake of securing more existence? The connectedness and relatedness of things is neither the super-real nor the infra-real; it is, it seems to me, as real as things themselves and no more.

In order to make a true synthesis of these various factors pragmatism needs to broaden out into a more comprehensive philosophy. It needs a deeper metaphysical interest. It needs for example to work out the larger implications of the idea of sympathy, which pragmatic writers insist must be a factor in the rational aspect of an ethical decision. Whether it can do this without abandoning the very assumptions and method which have formed the heart of pragmatism so far, will be doubted by many. It was just this idea of sympathy that led Bergson into a quite unpragmatic logic and a semi-idealistic cosmology.

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